

STARTING A DEBATE Three perspectives on one museum

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A recent workshop held by the working group “Museum” of the German Association of Anthropologists dealt with the many changes under way in German anthropological museums, from re-namings and re-brandings to renovations, refurbishments, and ultimately entire conceptual redevelopments of exhibitions and collections.¹ It seems as if the first two decades of the twenty-first century are witnessing the re-invention of the institution of the ethnographic museum in Germany, as well as in other European countries. However, it became clear at the workshop that, in Germany in particular, there is a remarkable lack of public as well as academic debate on these very recent developments, and a need for comparative analyses, mutual consultations and controversial debates among museum practitioners and theorists.²

The aim of the following ‘compilation’ of three reviews of the very same re-developed and re-opened museum, namely the anthropological museum of Cologne, the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum (RJM), is precisely to open such a debate. It takes the RJM as an example and attempts to explore its potential, achievements and pitfalls in a ‘polyphony’ of voices from three disciplines that ethnographic museums usually draw on or appeal to: cultural or social anthropology and art history.³ From each discipline, one museum lover or critic was invited to write a detailed review of the RJM, arguing, if possible, against the background of her or his discipline or her or his specialisation.

The RJM is a municipal museum, a child of Cologne’s bourgeois society of the early twentieth century, with its founding figures coming from well-known industrialist families, some of its first curators firmly rooted in diffusionist thinking and a later history that seems not to deviate very much from the history other German anthropological museums.⁴ However, in the early 1980s it became known for its socio-politically very provocative, explorative exhibits, tackling issues like drugs (Völger and von Welck 1981), male secret societies (Völger and von Welck 1990) and female power and male rule (Völger 1997) in a cross-cultural comparison. These exhibits were ground-breaking

¹ The workshop was entitled “Eine alte Institution neu gedacht. Neuaufstellungen ethnologischer Sammlungen in jüngster Zeit” and took place at the University of Cologne, 29–30 November 2012.

² So far, only the planned Humboldt-Forum in Berlin seems to have sparked a broader debate.

³ The RJM itself has time and again mounted exhibitions at the intersection of ethnography and (cultural) history or cultural history and art, be it on colonial photography in Samoa, on the shared or divided history of Germany and Namibia, or on sexuality and death in contemporary African art.

⁴ For a detailed history of the RJM, see Pützstück (1995) and Engelhard *et al.* (2001).

in that they systematically juxtaposed case studies from very diverse cultural and historical contexts in order to explore their subjects and hypotheses.

This experience and this profile were what the museum built on when it started developing a concept for a new permanent exhibition to be installed in an entirely new building. In 2010 the RJM reopened with an exhibition *parcours* that programmatically drew on these earlier exhibitions: It replaced the regional approach with a thematic layout, which to my knowledge is actually the first time an anthropological museum has fully abandoned the geographical principle, although ‘pockets’ of monographic displays within broader thematic sections do remain in the RJM. This, together with a very rich and varied scenography, won the museum several prizes (e.g. the Council of Europe Museum Prize 2012) and ensured it a very good performance in terms of visitor numbers in the first year after its opening: the RJM literally ‘drew the masses’ immediately after its reopening and remains an attractive tourist destination for visitors of the city of Cologne. However, a scholarly debate on the RJM’s new approach has by and large been lacking.

The three authors who have been invited to comment on the new permanent exhibition of the RJM are well-established scholars and museum theorists. The anthropologist Henrietta Lidchi is known for her work on the ‘poetics and politics of representation’ (Lidchi 2013) and, as Keeper of the Department of World Cultures, has overseen the redevelopment of the World Cultures galleries at the National Museum of Scotland (reopened in 2011). Helmut Groschwitz works as a free lance scholar and curator in the field of European anthropology and therefore reflects on how the museum deals with its own ‘European-ness’. Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff was a curator before she became Professor of Art History at the University of Trier and co-founded the university’s Centre for Postcolonial and Gender Studies. While Henrietta Lidchi and Helmut Groschwitz had an opportunity to revise their manuscripts for final publication, Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoffs sadly has not. She submitted her review at a very advanced stage of her illness – and with an admirable determination to leave no unfinished work behind; we feel honoured to be able to still include her thoughts in this debate. Her manuscript is being published in its original version and in memory of her groundbreaking work in post-colonial art history.

The three reviewers’ approaches reflect the three professional backgrounds and experiences, the debates ongoing in their respective disciplines, as well as personal interests and specialisations. Lidchi’s review gives a broad and detailed, theoretically well-grounded overview of the exhibit and has therefore been placed at the beginning. Groschwitz locates the new concept within Germany’s ethnographic museum landscape and focuses on how European and non-European objects, views and cultural practices are juxtaposed or made to speak to each other. Schmidt-Linsenhoff picks the scenography of the new RJM and those sections that speak to issues of art and to art historical debate, with a particular focus on the question of (postcolonial) representation. There are certainly many more interesting aspects of the RJM’s new appearance that could

be discussed in more detail, such as architectural issues, its proximity to the Museum Schnütgen of medieval art and the role of the Junior Museum, as well as the relationship between temporary and permanent exhibitions or between exhibitions and the programme of events, to name but a few.

The presentation of this tripartite review of the RJM is a plea to take exhibition and museum critique and analysis more seriously as a scholarly genre and as a method of analysis of representational formats of ethnography or anthropology.⁵ In addition, museum analysis can be seen as a field where museum and university or academic anthropology are intersecting in new and interesting ways, and where, consequently, a dialogue between what are, in the German-speaking context, two rather separate professional fields may re-emerge. The authors of this 'threeview' of the RJM would therefore like to encourage further commentary and debate.

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